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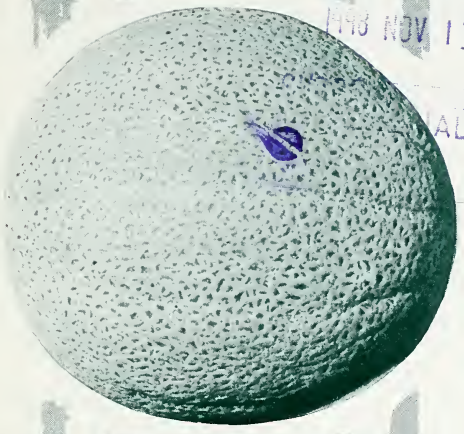

MUSKMELONS FOR THE GARDEN

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

LEAFLET NO. 509

MUSKMELONS FOR THE GARDEN

PREPARED BY CROPS RESEARCH DIVISION, AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH SERVICE

MUSKMELONS are hot-weather plants. They grow best on well-drained sandy loam or silt loam soils in climates that are hot and dry.

Leaf diseases may cause severe damage in humid climates. However, muskmelon varieties are available that can be grown successfully on any good garden soil wherever the growing season is long enough—140 days or more without frost, and 85 days or more of warm weather. The length of growing season will depend on the variety of melon you choose.

VARIETIES

Choose muskmelon varieties that are adapted to your area. For best results, follow variety recommendations of your county agricultural agent or your State agricultural experiment station.

Some favorite muskmelon varieties—and the areas where they are grown—follow:

Southern States. — Edisto, Edisto 47, Delta Gold, and Perlita (resistant to downy and powdery mildews); Smith's Perfect (resistant to downy mildew); PMR 45 (resistant to powdery mildew); Hearts of Gold, Hale's Best, and Hale's Jumbo.

Northeastern and East North Central States.—Iroquois, Delicious 51, Honey Rock, Spartan Rock, and Harvest Queen (resistant to fusarium); Pennsweet, Pride of Wisconsin, and Rocky Ford.

Arizona and California.—PMR 5 and PMR 6 (highly resistant to powdery mildew); PMR 45 and PMR 450 (somewhat resistant to powdery mildew).

Irrigated areas of West and Southwest. — Casaba, Persian, Crenshaw, and Honey Dew melons are adapted primarily to long-season irrigated areas. They may be grown in other areas if the warm growing season is long

enough—at least 120 days—but they are very susceptible to diseases aggravated by rain, and do not reach their best quality in rainy areas.

For best results in growing muskmelons—

- Buy seed from a reputable source.
- Select varieties adapted to your area.
- Prepare the soil at least 30 days in advance of planting, if feasible.
- Plant after all damage of frost is past or use plant covers over early seeded hills.
- Keep the planting weed-free.
- Irrigate when needed.
- Protect the planting against diseases and insect pests.

LIME AND FERTILIZER REQUIREMENTS

Needs for lime and fertilizer vary so widely, even over small areas, that specific recommendations cannot be given. Have your soil tested for lime and fertilizer needs before planting. For further information about soil testing, consult your county agricultural agent or your State agricultural experiment station.

Muskmelons will not grow well on strongly acid soils. These soils should be limed just enough to make them very slightly acid.

Commercial fertilizers are almost always needed for growing muskmelons successfully. A soil test will tell you how much fertilizer to apply. A good general garden fertilizer for your locality is usually satisfactory.

A typical program of fertilizer application is as follows:

- Apply ½ to 1 cup of mixed fertilizer (5–10–5, 5–10–10, or 4–8–8) to each hill three times during the growing season.
- Work the first application into the soil at planting time.
- Make the second application when runners are 12 to 18 inches long. Apply the fertilizer 6 to 8 inches away from the hill, along each side.
- Make the third application in bands, after the first melons set. Make bands 12 to 18 inches long and place them 6 to 8 inches away from the hill.

CULTURE

Preparing the Soil

Prepare the soil early enough for it to settle thoroughly by planting time. If you must turn under sod or other vegetation, do this in the fall to give the turned-under material time to decay. Do not follow this practice, however, if the soil is subject to erosion during the winter. If there is no vegetation to turn under, then plow, spade, or powertill the soil at least 1 month before planting.

Unless the muskmelon crop is to be grown on raised beds, the soil needs no further preparation until planting time. If the crop is to be grown on raised beds, form

the beds about 1 month before planting.

Muskmelons usually are not grown on raised beds unless they are to be furrow irrigated. However, where soil is poorly drained and heavy rains occur frequently during the growing season, it is best to bed the soil before planting. Form the beds 5 to 7 feet from center to center and with drainage furrows between them.

Irrigated early-spring muskmelons usually are grown on beds that are laid out so they run east and west. Make these beds 5 to 7 feet from center to center and 2 to 2½ feet high from the peak to the bottom of the intervening furrow.

For irrigated summer crops, bed the soil only slightly.

Just before planting, till the soil lightly with a rotary tiller or smooth the surface with a rake.

Planting

If you are planting muskmelons in the open without covers, delay seeding until danger of frost is past. Your county agricultural agent or State agricultural experiment station can tell you the average frost-free date for your locality. If, to get an early start, you plan to use plant covers, seed no sooner than 1 month before the frost-free date.

You can buy plant covers made of glassine, paper, or plastic from your seed dealer. Put covers over seeded hills and leave them in place—except as ventilation may be necessary—until danger of frost is past.

When growing an early irrigated crop, space hills 18 to 24 inches apart, just above the irrigation waterline on the south side of the bed. Soil on the south side warms quickly and tender plants growing there are protected from cold winds.

For irrigated summer crops or nonirrigated crops, space hills 5 to 7 feet apart each way.

Using a spading fork or a hoe, pulverize a 1-foot area of soil in the center of each hill. Work fertilizer into the pulverized soil. Smooth the fertilized area and cover it lightly with field soil. Then place six or eight seeds in each hill. If you are seeding before the frost-free date, keep the seeds within an area that can be roofed with a plant cover.

Cover the seeds with about ½ inch of soil. Firm the soil over the seeds with the back of the hoe or with your hand.

Thinning

Thin the seedlings twice. When one or two true leaves have appeared between the seed leaves, thin plants to four per hill. One or two weeks later, thin again to two widely spaced plants per hill.

Cultivating

Cultivate lightly—only enough to control weeds and to break the soil crust after heavy rains. Cultivating too deep or moving muskmelon vines during cultivation can injure the shallow roots.

Irrigating

Do not irrigate muskmelons unless they need it. If you do irrigate, begin by soaking the soil thoroughly before planting. Plant as soon as the soil dries out enough.

Irrigate when plants first tend to wilt during the day, or when vigorous growth stops. Try to irrigate without wetting the foliage, because wet foliage is susceptible to leaf spot diseases. For best results, irrigate with a soaker hose or run water through the furrows between hills.

Though rainfall in the East usually supplies enough soil moisture for muskmelons, irrigation may be necessary during periods of drought. Then soak the soil thoroughly every 10 to 12 days.

HARVESTING

When muskmelons are ripe, their skins turn yellow and blossom ends yield slightly when pressed. With experience you can judge when melons are ready for picking.

If muskmelons are picked too soon, they do not develop their maximum sugar content. If they are allowed to stay on the vine too long, they lose sugar and become soft.

The first melons ripen slowly. As the season advances, ripening is more rapid. Pick every other day for the first week of harvest. During the second week, pick every day. Toward the end of the season, the oftener you can pick, the better.

Honey Dews, Crenshaws, Casabas, and Persians must be cut from the vines. When other kinds of muskmelons are ripe, they will separate easily from the vines if you press on the stems lightly or if you lift the melons slightly off the ground.

DISEASES AND INSECTS

Many diseases that damage muskmelons can be controlled by careful culture. You should:

- Select disease-resistant varieties.
- Buy high-quality, disease-free seed.
- Plant where muskmelons, watermelons, squashes, cucumbers, or pumpkins have not been grown for at least 3 years.
- Keep the planting free of weeds.
- Destroy all wilting or dying plants.

To help you identify and control insects that attack muskmelons, see Home and Garden Buletin 46, "Insects and Diseases of Vegetables in the Home Garden." You can obtain a copy from the Office of Information, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. 20250. Send your request on a post card with your return address and ZIP Code.

For more information on the control of diseases and insect pests of muskmelons, consult your county agricultural agent, your State agricultural experiment station, or your State agricultural college.

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